


Lessons Learned in Public Land Management

Crested Pool is just one of the thermal features that earned Yellowstone its national park  distinction in 1872. (Neal Herbert/flickr)

Singled out for its unique thermal landscape, Yellowstone became the world's first national park in 1872. Since then, the U.S. government's approach to public land management has evolved, influenced by science and public opinion. National Park Service officials Patrick Gregerson and John Dennis offer lessons learned to others interested in public land management.

Identify unique attributes. What are the scenes, sounds, smells and stories that separate this land from other tracts? For Yellowstone, it is the park's position on one of the world's largest calderas and its possession of two-thirds of the world's geysers.

Consider cultural value. "I've really become sensitive to the park's cultural resources, and to seeing that they are of equal value to the natural resources," said Dennis, who began as a plant biologist. Although valued for its natural resources, Yellowstone holds spiritual value among Native American tribes and witnessed storied westward expansion by early settlers.

Make a plan. "Planning provides a logical, trackable rationale for decisionmaking," Gregerson said. A good plan answers questions like these: What is this park's purpose? What makes it significant? What are its fundamental resources and values?

Involve everyone. "All citizens have a role in planning," Gregerson said. The park service asks for input from state, local and tribal governments, nonprofit organizations and private industry whenever it is considering any action that might have an environmental impact. It records all discussions publicly and allows the public to comment throughout the process.


Keep an open mind. The U.S. Forest Service, for example, wanted to use a herbicide in Pacific Northwest forests to encourage conifer growth. Concerned about toxicity, a coalition of planters, scientists and residents worked with the agency to develop a plan that did not rely on herbicide for tree growth. That's typical. Gregerson said agencies tweak most plans before implementing.

Look for mitigating measures. Agencies request a "mitigating measure" when environmental harm is done or public access lost. If the Bureau of Land Management extracts minerals, the park service could ask its sister agency (both are under the U.S. Department of the Interior) to offset the harm done by buying adjacent, equivalent — down to the number of trees — land.

Seek tourism and preservation. Managing parks so people can enjoy them is a park service mandate. "Many people have argued there is conflict between preservation and enjoyment," Dennis said. "I've come to realize that it's not a conflict — both are absolutely necessary to meet the purpose of the parks."

Our Heritage, Our Charge


by: Resson Kantai Duff, projects officer with [Save the Elephants](#)

A caravan of elephants crosses a road in 
the Masai Mara National Reserve. (Matt
Biddulph/flickr)

The complexity of the African continent and its diverse environment cannot be described succinctly. Too many times however, the “African” environment has been boxed into one contiguous land with wide-open plains, wet forests and desert-scapes, and one people living in this vast landscape, teeming with wildlife. Each African country has a rich and unique biodiversity, which, in many cases, is inextricably linked to our cultures. We have every reason to be proud. As young African leaders, we must recognize that with this amazing heritage comes great responsibility to protect, to nurture, and to define the narrative that underpins that nature. Put simply, it is up to us to decide where nature and conservation fit in at this time of “Africa rising.”

In many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, wildlife and the environment have languished at the bottom of the national agenda. Understaffed and underfunded government units were expected to oversee it all. But these units often alienated people from their ancestral resources. As a young girl growing up in Kenya, I often heard people use the phrase “wanyama wa serikali” – the government’s wildlife. In Kenya, it is only in recent years that the narrative of community conservation – where communities are empowered to manage and reap benefits from wildlife – is taking root in pastoral lands. This is a development I have watched and celebrated, as both an urban Maasai and an academic conservationist.

Still, with such an entrenched belief that the environment is not their responsibility, people’s attitudes toward wildlife are slow to evolve, especially in agricultural lands where human-wildlife conflict is an issue. These negative attitudes have permeated policymaking. And as development takes center stage, railways, roads, pipelines, mines and human habitation eat away space for wildlife.

Resson Kantai Duff has turned 
her passion for wildlife
conservation into a position with
the Save the Elephants
organization. (Sean Dundas)

Taking a step back, we have to ask: Why should wildlife take a more prominent role? Is there reason to celebrate them? Yes! Firstly, Africa is the world’s richest continent in terms of natural resources, and the environment has given back to the continent in immeasurable ecosystem services.

Ecological processes such as pollination, climate control, and water purification are essential for life, not to mention the baseline economic activities on which many of our economies depend. The wildlife themselves are great facilitators of some of these processes, pollinating, breaking down waste and controlling pests. Elephants in equatorial forests, for example, disperse seeds no other agent can. Removing them from the ecosystem would cause the decline of important tree species and lead to a trophic cascade, exacerbating climate change.

For tourist destinations like Kenya and Tanzania, wildlife are of defining importance. If for one reason or another tourists cannot see wildlife, wildlife tourism ceases to be. This affects everyone from the communities who rely on tourism to the managers in the hotels and the vegetable sellers on the streets. For me personally, it has been painful to watch friends employed in the lodges and hotels around our research camp being laid off as our tourism slump continues.

Yet it has taken a wildlife crime wave of catastrophic proportions to wake us up to wildlife's value. Elephants, rhinos, pangolins and big cats are just some of the species under threat from the illegal wildlife trade. They are a recent whispering memory.

Perhaps it is the world's collective ownership of African megafauna that is crowding out homegrown solutions to these problems. This global ownership has invited a slew of internationally crafted solutions for the problems we face. But with a plethora of African scientists, advocates and policymakers, and with vibrant youth to take up these positions, we can work for the betterment of our environment, and our future.

So far, my part in the story has been small, but I take great pride in it. As I concentrate on understanding the intricacies of the ivory trade, I am beginning to see how crucial it is for us to tackle our own problems. Everyone must play their part. It will take brave leaders to root out the corruption that allows our wildlife to leave our continent in proverbial body bags. It will take young policymakers to ensure the environment is considered in tandem with development. It will take creative inventors to think up [innovative solutions to human wildlife conflict](#). It will take communities and landowners to secure and respect wildlife on their properties. It will take diplomats and campaigners to build [bridges of awareness](#) with wildlife consumer countries. It will take concerned urbanites and civil society groups to pressure governments to keep wildlife conservation on the national agenda. And it will take everyone to build a collective sense of pride and ownership for our wildlife.

No one else will suffer this loss more than the youth of Africa. No one else has so much to gain.

Resson Kantai Duff is projects officer with [Save the Elephants](#), a leading elephant research and conservation organization headquartered in Kenya. An urban Maasai and academic conservationist, Kantai Duff is passionate about Africa's environmental heritage and committed to its preservation.
